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Dialect Contact in a Los Angeles Public School

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ABSTRACT: As is well known, Los Angeles is home to a large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants from a variety of different countries. Studies on the Spanish spoken in LA County have demonstrated the existence of a distinct dialect, a product of koineization and dialect leveling. In this paper we seek to explore the dynamics of such leveling as it occurs in a public elementary school in this area. Taking into consideration the fact that use of Spanish is not permitted in the public school classroom, we choose to observe children's use of this language during recess, lunch and a structured after school program designed to help Spanish speakers improve their English skills. These observations are further supplemented by answers to informal interviews with students from the after school program. The evidence that we find provides further support for the validity of LA Spanish as a distinct dialect and serves to illuminate, at least in part, the role that the public school setting plays in the creation of linguistic norms.

KEYWORDS: dialect contact, koineization, Los Angeles Spanish, elementary school, playground, *voseo*, language attitude

Recent interest in the study of the Spanish of the United States as a legitimate linguistic entity has motivated much research on the Spanish spoken in specific regions of the country. Numerous studies done by Claudia Parodi on the Spanish spoken in and around Los Angeles, for instance, have revealed that this variety is a dialect in its own right, distinct from standard Mexican Spanish and in possession of features not attributable to English influence. Such an affirmation is groundbreaking because it challenges a number of deeply held beliefs regarding the supposed degradation of Spanish of the United States while at the same time opening up new avenues of investigation related to dialect contact and koineization.

Studying Los Angeles Spanish (LA Spanish) as a separate dialect as opposed to a corrupt state of Spanish requires the use of some additional classificatory tools. A dichotomy that proves useful when discussing questions of contact between different dialects of Spanish is that of *tierras altas* vs. *tierras bajas* dialects, first conceived of in the field of Spanish dialectology and more recently employed by Parodi to address the linguistic situation in LA.¹ As Parodi (2003) affirms, implementing this abstraction allows us to observe patterns in language use that may not necessarily be evident when examining dialects of various immigrant groups in isolation. This classification, which coincides for the most part with geographical region (coastal vs. inland regions), is based primarily on phonological features such as aspiration of /s/, velarization of /n/, and elision of /d/ in intervocalic position as well as the morphological feature of *voseo*, the use of the second person singular pronoun *vos* and its corresponding verb forms. *Tierras bajas* dialects are spoken along the coasts, while *tierras altas* dialects are concentrated in the central regions of America. As seen in table 1 below, the relevant features are in complementary distribution in the standard varieties of these two dialect groups.²

TABLE 1 Features of *tierras altas* vs. *tierras bajas* dialects

FEATURE	EXAMPLE	TIERRAS ALTAS SPANISH	TIERRAS BAJAS SPANISH
Aspiration of /s/	['lah 'treh] 'las tres'	No	Yes
Velarization of /n/	['kan.taŋ] 'cantan'	No	Yes
Loss of /d/ between V ³ __V	[ka.'ya.ðo] 'callado'	No	Yes
Epenthesis of /y/ between 'i __ a	['di.ya] 'día'	No	Yes
Loss of /y/ between i, e __ V	['e.a] 'ella'	No	Yes

(Adapted from Parodi 2004, 280)

Most Mexican Spanish, with the notable exception of that of Veracruz, which, as Lope Blanch explains is “de tierras bajas, de corte caribeño,” is *tierras altas* Spanish, as is that spoken in Los Angeles (16). Before continuing any further, we will briefly describe the main features of LA Spanish. In particular, we will focus on those features which demonstrate that this is a dialect in its own right, leaving aside those features of LA Spanish that can be attributed to English influence. We are left with those in table 2 below, which fall into three

broad categories: phonological, syntactic and evaluative. All of the phonological features, it must be noted, correspond to those of *tierras altas* dialects. The syntactic features are characteristic of rural Mexican Spanish. The evaluations assigned to these syntactic features as well as to *tierras bajas* phonological features and to *voseo* differ sharply from those of Standard Mexican Spanish. Thus, those features that are stigmatized in Standard Mexican Spanish are accepted as normal in LA Spanish and vice versa.

TABLE 2 Main Linguistic Features of Los Angeles Spanish

	LA SPANISH FEATURE	EXAMPLE
General Phonetic	<i>Tierras altas</i> features	
Evaluative	<i>Tierras bajas</i> phonology and lexicon stigmatized <i>Voseo</i> stigmatized Archaic Spanish features accepted as normal	
Archaic Phonetic	Pronunciation of /f/ as [x] before ['we] Contraction of article before vowel	['xwe] (cf. <i>fue</i>) l'escuela (cf. <i>la escuela</i>)
Archaic Morphosyntactic	Generalization of -s to 2nd sg. preterit Imperfect 1st person pl. ending in -nos	dijistes (cf. <i>dijiste</i>) andábanos (cf. <i>andábamos</i>)
Archaic Lexical	<i>haiga, mesmo, ansina</i>	

(Adapted from Parodi 2010b)

It is important to understand that Los Angeles Spanish, although widespread, is a non-standard oral dialect that is used primarily in the home and, furthermore, not taught in school. Most speakers of this variety also speak English, and many are actually English-dominant. Given such facts it seems surprising that this LA Spanish should be acquired by second-generation children born in the United States to parents who speak *tierras bajas* dialects as Parodi (2003, 2004, 2010b, 2009b) affirms. Some interesting questions then arise: How do these children learn to speak LA Spanish, a *tierras altas* dialect? Why do they do so?

In this paper we adopt Parodi's proposal that LA Spanish is a koiné that arises as the result of contact between the rural Mexican Spanish that is spoken here and the *tierras bajas* dialects that are imported from such Central American countries as El Salvador and Honduras.⁴ The prestige and seniority of Mexican Spanish are, according to her (2010b, 2009b), the primary factors that establish the dominance of *tierras altas* features. As Parodi (2005) points out,

LA Spanish is a dialect which “adquieren los bilingües que nacen en el área angelina,” a fact that suggests that they must learn it at a young age (278). Since research on dialect acquisition, such as Payne’s groundbreaking study on the Philadelphia dialect, has shown that children’s speech is most heavily influenced by that of their peers, we are led to the conclusion that the type of setting which gives rise to this koineization must allow children of different nationalities to come into contact with one another (175). For this reason, we will examine the possibility that the koineization process could begin in the public elementary school. We will use data obtained from observations conducted at a public elementary school in LA County to attempt to determine whether children whose families speak *tierras bajas* dialects not only receive the necessary exposure to LA Spanish in this environment, but also to see if it is here that they encounter social pressures and practices that will motivate them to acquire *tierras altas* features.

The research questions we hope to address are the following:

1. Are children exposed to Los Angeles Spanish in public schools?
2. Have these children acquired or are they in the process of acquiring Los Angeles Spanish?
3. Is it possible to identify social behaviors and practices that may motivate children to acquire Los Angeles Spanish?

1. HYPOTHESIS

It is our hypothesis that Spanish-speaking children attending LA public elementary schools undergo a preliminary stage of dialect leveling in favor of LA Spanish. We suspect that this process is motivated by Mexican American children and adults who impose their dialect on speakers of *tierras bajas* Spanish.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Location

Data regarding children’s language use at school was collected at *ABC Elementary*, a public elementary school, 85% of whose population is Hispanic, which is located in Los Angeles County.⁵ Rather than observing children in the classroom, it was decided to do so when they were on school grounds but at times when their language was not regulated, i.e. during lunch and recess periods and during an after school program attended solely by children of Hispanic origin.

2.2 Observations

Using the aforementioned research questions as a guide, observations were made on the following aspects of language use and attitudes at the school:

1. School staff/employee language use
2. Student language use
3. Presence of phonological, syntactic and lexical features that identified a linguistic variety as belonging to particular regional dialect
4. Frequency and consistency of use of such features
5. Reactions of both children and adults to one another's language use, including students' general attitudes towards individuals of other nationalities

The ethnographic observations described above were further supplemented by informal interviews carried out with some of the students from the *XYZ After School Program* as well as two after school program tutors. Details regarding these interviews will be discussed below in the section regarding language attitudes.

3. LANGUAGE USE AT ABC ELEMENTARY

Before reporting any results from the observations, it must be noted that this is merely a preliminary study conducted at one school which may or may not be representative of Los Angeles schools in general. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that we lack a great deal of important information about the children at this school: what generation they belong to, whether they were born here or abroad, whether they are proficient speakers of Spanish, etc. Thus, we must qualify the following comments with the caveat that we do not know, as of yet, whether or not these students are representative of Los Angeles area elementary school students as a whole.

3.1 Adults

There are three groups of bilingual adults who work at the school and speak Spanish on a regular basis: 1) the office staff, 2) the yard supervisors and 3) the tutors from the *XYZ After School Program*. Since students have little contact with the office staff, we will omit them from our discussion and focus on the yard supervisors and then discuss briefly the after school program tutors.

3.1.1 The Yard Supervisors

The four women who work as yard supervisors are speakers of Mexican Spanish. They are all members of the local community who have either grown up in Los Angeles or lived there for at least 20 years. Their dominant language is, without a doubt, Spanish. Their duties consist of enforcing playground rules, settling children's disputes, maintaining order in the cafeteria and helping children when they get hurt. The rapport between students and yard supervisors is a good one, and the children view these women more as friends than as authority figures. They eagerly share news with the yard supervisors and often gather around them and follow them as they patrol the schoolyard. Such behavior is most commonly seen among the Hispanic children, who tend to speak with the yard supervisors in Spanish.

3.1.2 The XYZ After School Program Staff

This group, which consists of work-study students who attend the local community college, is also fully bilingual. Their dominant language, however, is English; and, with a few exceptions, they always address the students in English. The bilingual skills of the staff are put to use when they communicate with the students' parents and guardians, many of whom speak little English. They also code switch amongst themselves, maintaining a conversation in Spanish on occasion.

3.2 Students

Not surprisingly, English is the language of choice on the playground at *ABC Elementary*. That being said, it must be noted that some students do speak Spanish at school, both with one another and with adults outside the classroom.

3.2.1 Student Language Use on the Playground

As is to be expected given the prevalence and prestige of English in the public schools, students' interaction in Spanish is minimal. Surprisingly enough, however, Spanish is frequently heard on the playground due to the yard supervisors' preference for this language. The majority of the students who were heard speaking Spanish during recess or lunch did so in conversations with the yard supervisors. Aside from these interactions, students were also overheard speaking Spanish with one another. The same pairs of students exchanged remarks in Spanish on several different occasions. The other cases observed were isolated instances in which children made exclamations that did not require responses.

3.2.2 Student Language Use at XYZ After School Program

While the majority of interactions in Spanish on the playground occurred between students and adults, this is not true of the Spanish use observed in the after school program. In fact, these children speak English almost exclusively with the program tutors.⁶ Some of the younger children are not yet proficient in English and do not always understand what they are being told. In these situations, students will help their classmates by translating for them. Students in the after school program are also heard using Spanish when they call their parents to ask them to pick them up. Finally, the children will speak Spanish to one another on occasion but, like their playground interactions, these are mainly exclamations or commands and rarely require a response.

4. SPANISH SPOKEN AT ABC ELEMENTARY

4.1 The Adults

The following table provides a summary of the main phonological, lexical and syntactic features that characterize the Spanish spoken by the two main groups of adults at ABC Elementary: 1) the yard supervisors and 2) the XYZ After School Program tutors.

TABLE 3 LA Spanish Features Present in Adult Speech

LA SPANISH FEATURES	YARD SUPERVISORS	XYZ AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM TUTORS
Maintenance of /s/	Yes	Yes
Alveolar /n/	Yes	Yes
Pronunciation of /f/ as [x] (e.g. ['xwi] instead of ['fwi])	Yes	No
Weakening of /x/ to [h]	Yes	Yes
Generalization of -s to 2nd sg. preterit verb forms (e.g. <i>fuistes</i>)	Yes ; e.g.: <i>fuistes</i> (you went); <i>comprastes</i> (you bought)	No
Use of <i>haiga</i>	No	No
Redundant use of subject pronouns	Yes	Yes
Tuteo	Yes	Yes
Code switching	Yes; younger women more than the older ones	Yes
Mexican Spanish vocabulary	Yes; e.g. <i>chamarra</i> (jacket); <i>cuate</i> (twin)	Yes

4.2 The Students

The Spanish spoken by the students at *ABC Elementary* is, without a doubt, a *tierras altas* dialect. This is evident mainly from the phonological features, such as the maintenance of /s/ in syllable final position and the alveolar /n/. The vocabulary that they employ is mainly standard Mexican, as illustrated below in table 4:

TABLE 4 Syntactic and Lexical Features of Student Spanish at *ABC Elementary*

	MEXICAN SPANISH FEATURES	EXAMPLE	TRANSLATION	TIERRAS BAJAS EQUIVALENT
Syntactic	Use of clitic <i>le</i> with intransitive verbs	¡Córrele! ¡Ándale!	Get running! Get moving!	
Lexical	Use of Mexican lexicon	cochino/marrano pastel	pig cake	chanchito keike
	Use of semantic extensions	librería	Standard Spanish: bookstore Intended meaning: library	biblioteca
	Use of English borrowings	troca bos	truck bus	camión (auto)bus

The following are examples of phrases uttered by the children while on the playground:

1. *¡No me lo pongas al pelo!* ‘Don’t put that in my hair!’
2. *¡Bájate de ahí!* ‘Get down from there!’
3. *Quiero que vengas a recogerme.* ‘I want you to come pick me up.’
4. *¡Dámelo!* ‘Give it to me!’
5. *¡Córrele, la campana sonó!* ‘Get running, the bell rang!’

5. LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

5.1 The XYZ After School Program Staff

Interviews with some of the *XYZ After School Program* staff revealed very definite negative attitudes towards a particular *tierras bajas* dialect: Salvadoran Spanish. Two of the tutors said that this variety was incorrect and cited a variety of linguistic features that struck them as ‘weird’ or ‘different,’ such as *voseo*, general pronunciation differences and some lexical differences, such as the use of *pacha* for ‘baby bottle.’²⁷

The attitudes towards Salvadoran Spanish expressed by the two tutors that were interviewed are representative of their communities, as evidenced by the existence of several negative terms used to refer to Salvadorans as well as examples of friends and family members who also share these feelings and often tease or imitate Salvadorans and their speech.

5.2 Students

As mentioned previously, a small handful of the students attending the *XYZ After School Program* were selected to answer some questions regarding their language use and attitudes. As with the observations, it is important to remember that we do not know whether or not these students are representative of Los Angeles public school students as a whole.

Students' attitudes do not begin to approximate those of the *XYZ After School Program* staff with respect to the intolerance that the latter express towards features of *tierras bajas* Spanish, in particular, the Salvadoran dialect. Nevertheless, answers to the question, "Do you know anyone who speaks Spanish funny or weird?" and their self-reported opinions of *voseo* do indicate that Salvadoran (and Honduran) Spanish are definitely considered "weird" while Mexican Spanish never is.⁸ It is interesting to note that students' answers to questions regarding *voseo* can be classified into two different categories based on the origins of their families. Those students of Mexican ancestry were completely unaware of the existence of such a form. Students whose families were from Central America, on the other hand, identified *voseo* as a form that was used in their parents' homelands and, though some stated that they used it when visiting family abroad, none reported using it in Los Angeles. While they did not express negative attitudes towards *voseo* or those who used it, they were all careful to distance themselves from it. For instance, one student of Guatemalan descent, who said that *voseo* sounded normal to her, also expressed the belief that it was "like another language" and that "[here] they don't really understand [*voseo*]." The other students whose families were from Guatemala were also of the opinion that *voseo* was normal. The one Central American who said that it sounded weird was a student of Honduran background. The case of this particular student, along with that of her best friend, a student of Mexican descent, will be discussed in the following section.

6. POSSIBLE MOTIVATION FOR DIALECT ACQUISITION

As mentioned previously, the linguistic attitudes and behaviors of two students enrolled in the after school program are of particular interest for this study and deserve a detailed discussion. “Karen” and “Erica,” as we will refer to them, are fifth-graders at *ABC Elementary* and are best friends. Both were born and raised in Los Angeles, although Karen’s family is from Mexico and Erica’s is from Honduras.

When asked if children teased others about the way they spoke Spanish, Karen and Erica were the only ones who answered in the affirmative: Karen because she was the teaser and Erica because she was the one being teased. It is interesting to note that Karen frequently makes fun of Erica’s Honduran background and Erica of Karen’s Mexican roots. Yet this reciprocity does not persist when it comes to the way each one speaks Spanish. Both seem to accept the attitude that Mexican Spanish is the norm, as seen by the fact that teasing regarding language only goes one way. This belief is also reflected in both girls’ opinions of *voseo*. Karen’s comment regarding this usage was that her friend Erica uses it when she’s “trying to speak like a hondureño.” Erica, on the other hand, said that she used *voseo* in Honduras but not at home. Moreover, she was the only student of Central American background who said that it sounded weird to her. Once again, Erica seems to have adopted Karen’s belief that *voseo* is abnormal in Los Angeles because it differs from Mexican Spanish.

7. DISCUSSION

Let us return to the four research questions posed at the beginning of this article (repeated below) and see how the results reported in the previous section can provide us with some preliminary answers.

1. Are children exposed to Los Angeles Spanish in public schools?
2. Have these children acquired or are they in the process of acquiring Los Angeles Spanish?
3. Is it possible to identify social behaviors (e.g. teasing, name-calling, etc.) and practices that may motivate children to acquire Los Angeles Spanish?

The answer to the first question is, quite clearly, yes. Children at *ABC Elementary* are exposed to Los Angeles Spanish on a daily basis, mainly through interactions with the yard supervisors and after school program staff, as well as through limited contact with one another.

Answering the second question is, however, a more complex matter. Taken as a whole, the corpus of Spanish spoken at *ABC Elementary*, as documented by the researcher, indicates that the dialect used by these children is definitely from the *tierras altas*. As Parodi (2005) explains, when trying to determine whether people have acquired the Los Angeles Spanish dialect it is also necessary to consider their evaluations of certain linguistic features such as *voseo*. With respect to such attitudes, we see that once again the children at *ABC Elementary* fail to assign a stigma to the use of *vos*, as do speakers of this dialect.⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that they find it abnormal, together with their avoidance of it and denial that they use it at home does seem to indicate the beginnings of a rejection of this form. Furthermore, *voseo* seems to be the primary target of ridicule based on a student's speech, as attested by information from both Karen and Erica.

While the information obtained from observations alone does not permit us to give a definite positive or negative answer to this question, the data obtained from recordings to be made in the near future will, hopefully, do so. For now, the only affirmation we can make is that all of the factors discussed above lead to the preliminary conclusion that the students of *ABC Elementary* are possibly in the very first stages of acquiring the LA Spanish dialect. Although there are very few features in their speech that can be attributed solely to LA Spanish, the lack of others, such as aspiration of /s/ and velarization of /n/ in syllable final position and *voseo*, cannot be adequately explained without positing such a process of dialect leveling in which they begin to discard features of *tierras bajas* Spanish.

The answer to question 3 is summarized in the table below. Looking at table 5, which contrasts the students' Spanish with *tierras altas* Spanish and with that spoken in *tierras bajas*, it is clear that the Spanish spoken by children at *ABC Elementary* exhibits almost all of the features of *tierras altas* Spanish. More specifically, it is possible to identify a number of phonological and lexical features in their speech that are characteristic of Mexican Spanish. Only further research will indicate whether or not these are features of LA Spanish as well.

TABLE 5 Spanish Spoken at ABC Elementary: A Dialect Comparison

	TIERRAS ALTAS SPANISH	SPANISH SPOKEN AT ABC ELEMENTARY	TIERRAS BAJAS SPANISH
Aspiration of /s/	No	No	Yes
Aspiration of /x/	No	No	Yes
Velarization of /n/	No	No	Yes
Epenthesis of /y/ between 'i __ a	No	No	Yes
Loss of /y/ between i, e __ V	No	No	Yes
Weakening/loss of atonic vowels	Yes	No	No

Both the attitudes towards Salvadoran Spanish of the two XYZ *Program* tutors and the distaste that Karen shows towards the way Erica speaks Spanish provide evidence for the social pressures that we hoped to identify in question 3. In addition, the fact that the linguistic norm at the school lacks nearly all features of the Spanish of *tierras bajas*, especially aspiration of /s/, velarization of /n/ and *voseo*, also serves to confirm the unspoken belief that Mexican Spanish is the standard and everything else is abnormal.

8. CONCLUSION

Adopting the view of the Spanish of Los Angeles as a separate dialect, rather than a corrupt form of Spanish, opens wide the possibilities for conducting research regarding questions of dialect contact and acquisition. While a number of the findings that are reported in this study lack the support of the proper quantitative methodology that would indicate whether or not they are representative of Los Angeles County elementary school students as a whole, one, in particular, suggests that this line of investigation is on the right track. The discovery that bilingual children do indeed have need of Spanish for communicative purposes (e.g. when interacting with the yard supervisors), is significant because it provides evidence of dialect contact, the first step required for koineization to occur. It is our hope that further research will provide us with similar data which supports the analysis of LA Spanish as a dialect in its own right rather than a corrupt version of the Spanish language.

Notes

1. Wagner, Max L. "El español de América y el latín vulgar." Instituto de Filología de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1920. Print.
2. It is important to note that some of these features, such as the loss of an intervocalic /d/, are found in the popular varieties of *tierras altas* Spanish. However, the contrast between the two dialect groups is most clearly observed when speaking in terms of an abstract, standard variety of the dialects.
3. The abbreviation V will be used throughout this paper to represent any vowel.
4. First put forth in Parodi (2003), this proposal is very similar to one made regarding New World Spanish in Hidalgo, Margarita. "One Century of Study in New World Spanish." *International Journal of Sociology of Language* 149 (2001): 9-32. Print.
5. The names of both people and places in this study have been changed in order to maintain the anonymity of all parties involved.
6. The few exceptions to this generalization are those children who are not yet proficient English speakers. However, even they try to communicate in English or with gestures, using little Spanish.
7. Speakers of Mexican Spanish use the words *mamila* or *biberón* when referring to this object.
8. It must be noted here that the questions used in this portion of the study are far from ideal for use in a study regarding language attitudes. However, both the preliminary nature of this study, as well time limitations favored the use of these direct questions. Future phases of this project will undoubtedly involve improvements in terms of methodology and reformulation of the questions being asked.
9. Again, it is necessary to keep in mind that such self-reported opinions may not accurately reflect children's actual attitudes. Nevertheless, the candidness with which they responded to all questions as well as the fact that these interviews were conducted individually, reducing any cause for embarrassment, seems to indicate that these are the children's actual opinions.

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